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ABSTRACT

A pilot course was begun to provide English language training for non-native speakers of English who needed to develop language skills for their work in the garment industry. One advantage to this kind of language learning situation is that the environment provides ready materials, situations, subjects, and practical learning activities. The curriculum must be designed to fit the working environment, and the behavioral objectives established for the course must reflect the workers' needs. It was determined that workers should be able to: (1) communicate effectively with other workers and supervisors; (2) identify and carry out daily work responsibilities; (3) identify parts of the sewing machine and describe their function; and (4) participate in informal social conversations. Learning activities thus centered around giving and receiving instructions, explanations of the industry's operations, practice filling out forms, problem solving, and discussion of workers' actual experience during work hours. (AM)

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ESL ON THE JOB

The Jantzen Experience

Jan Laylin

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

In January, 1974, the Vancouver YWCA and the Status of Women sponsored a research project to identify specific problems of immigrant women in the labour force, related to employment, education, social services and health. When the research was completed several members of the sponsoring organizations formed a new group, the Immigrant Women's Advocate Committee, whose primary goal was to pursue the recommendations made in the report. One of the recommendations dealt with the need for English language training for non-native English speaking workers in the garment industry. The IWAC took up this issue and set out to find willing sponsors for a pilot project of this nature. Such a program became a reality in January, 1976, at Jantzen of Canada Ltd. in Vancouver, sponsored jointly by Jantzen, the Department of Manpower and Immigration, Vancouver Community College and the Social Planning Department of the City of Vancouver. It was decided that 4 classes of 6 weeks duration would be held in succession. Each class would consist of 12 trainees attending class on site for one hour every day, the first hour of the work day. The goal of the program would be to help the workers cope more adequately in the work environment and to provide them with a foundation and encouragement for further development of their language competency. I was to be the instructor and, therefore, became responsible for developing a curriculum and classroom approach specifically serving the needs of Jantzen. I was glad my poverty-stricken state of recent years had at least forced me to learn to sew.

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While this type of course does not yet exist on a large scale throughout Canada or the U.S.A., it serves the purpose of providing a well-defined experience, exposure to which all teachers of ESL should be able to benefit, particularly in terms of curriculum planning and

classroom approach. Though this paper deals with a specific situation, it is hoped discussion of some of the more pertinent and applicable aspects of the program, based on my experience and plans for its continuation this Fall, will bring to light and emphasize goals and considerations essential to the development of any language learning program.

ADVANTAGES

It is difficult to imagine a more practical and relevant type of language learning situation. The proximity of the work environment permits the use of job-related materials (e.g., garments, pieces, accessories, machines, time sheets), situations (e.g., requesting instructions, clarification, permission, stating needs, expressing feelings), people (supervisors, office staff, co-workers) and practical classroom activities ("Join the shoulders", "Tell her to change the needle") possible to an extent rarely found in a language class. It also enables the instructor to observe workers and supervisors on the job, to determine which work-related, social and cultural difficulties exist as a result of language inadequacy and to then design a course which focuses on the specific needs of the students. Once identification of these needs has been made the instructor is able to decide which communicative skills should be incorporated into the course. If language learned in the classroom is natural and relevant it can be immediately reinforced in the "real" job situation. Another important advantage is that the teacher can evaluate, revise, discard and add to curriculum on a daily basis, encourage the supervisors to participate and keep in close touch with the progress of the students.

PLANNING THE COURSE CURRICULUM

I am forced to admit to my rather bewildered, directionless, panicky attempts to prepare myself for the first class. Fortunately, the first group consisted of 12 beginners, from basic to upper, so the curriculum which eventually evolved remained simple while providing me with some understanding of how to proceed further. But in the earlier planning

stages it soon became apparent that I must first familiarize myself with the total Jantzen environment. While students' circumstances are not often so clearly defined and easily observable, this process is a necessary prerequisite to designing a course which meets the varying needs of students. For the sake of clarification I offer below some of the data which eventually became part of my working knowledge.

1. Floor plan.
2. Names and functions of supervisory and other support staff with whom workers deal.
3. Operational terms and lexical items relevant to each (cutting, sewing, finishing) section.
4. Progress of a garment from design to finish (i.e., who does what with the item after each operation is completed).
5. Factory procedures, regulations, routines, etc.
6. Common problems occurring in each section.
7. The sewing machine - types, parts and their functions, common difficulties, repairs, maintenance.
8. Daily routine followed by most employees.

Once a teacher knows his or her students' circumstances it is then possible to isolate the situations in which communication is necessary and/or desirable. At Jantzen no one was really able to offer specific examples to me, so one morning before the program began, I roamed around the factory watching what was going on. While I was talking to a supervisor, an English speaking sewer came over and asked for some sewing instructions. The supervisor replied quickly with a series of four or five instructions. When asked how she would have communicated those same instructions to a non-native speaker with limited competency, the supervisor said she would have to sit down and show the sewer. And what if the sewer needed thread or labels or more work? If she was sick and wanted to go home? If her pay cheque was wrong? If she had a problem and merely wanted to express feelings or concerns? The supervisor offered several possibilities, such as 1) misunderstanding might occur;

2) time and money (for the sewers' pay is based on productivity) would be wasted in trying to get the message across; 3) both people would become irritated and impatient with frustration; or 4) communication wouldn't take place at all, or even be attempted.

From this single encounter I was able to perceive some of the more evident needs, from which the overall curriculum in its present state has evolved. I have now set down some specific performance objectives (language functions) which seem to encompass those needs of which I have become aware so far. The exercise of developing such objectives is vital as the teacher must be conscious of what, in communicative terms, the students should be able to do. The level to which these objectives can be achieved obviously depends upon the students' competency, but the functions are the same for almost everyone in this particular situation.

To illustrate this point, I have listed below some of the performance objectives pertinent to the Jantzen situation, but applicable to any work setting. They range from the general to the specific and I depend upon them to keep me "honest". It is often too easy to be distracted by language one happens to feel like teaching but nobody really needs to know (or worse yet, nobody actually says). In any case, workers at Jantzen should be able to ....

1. communicate effectively with supervisors, office personnel, co-workers and other support staff, such as mechanics, quality auditors, utility girls, in job-related situations. This would include dealing with common problems occurring from time to time, such as requesting time off, making repairs, discussing overtime, etc.
2. identify and carry out daily work responsibilities and factory procedures in response to direction.
3. identify parts of the sewing machine and describe their function. Explain problems and procedures related to machine maintenance.

4. participate in informal social conversations.

With established performance objectives a teacher moves on to determine which communicative skills, i.e., enabling objectives, students must acquire in order to achieve the performance objectives. In this case, the primary skills included 1) forming questions in a variety of ways, such as requesting permission, advice, clarification, instruction, etc., 2) responding to questions and making statements of explanation and clarification, 3) responding to directions appropriately (i.e., demonstrating comprehension), 4) using lexical items correctly, 5) expressing oneself appropriately in informal social exchanges, and so on.

We've all experienced the sick feeling of knowing, right in the middle of a lesson, that what we're doing is not relevant to the students' needs. I've always recognized this as a result of a lack of careful thought and sensitivity on my part. The process of working through the objectives discussed above has helped me in all my classes to avoid such depressing experiences by forcing me to focus on reality.

CLASSROOM APPROACH

Many work situations, of which this is a prime example, consist largely of giving and carrying out instructions. In the classroom this type of activity, particularly for beginners, proves amazingly successful from the student's viewpoint in terms of assimilation and retention, allows for endless variation and expansion at any level and encourages creativity. At Jantzen, sewers work terribly hard and are under great pressure to produce (it means money to them) and I found physical activity in the classroom helped create a relaxed and often humorous atmosphere. Again, the proximity of the work situation facilitates use of materials which workers use every day. It seems that the combination of language attached to familiar physical movements ("Measure the length. How long is it?") and the use of familiar materials helps to internalize language.

Following are descriptions of some activities which I found particularly effective in the classroom.

1) Instructional terms and vocabulary

Bring in a Jantzen blouse or any garment, its pieces and accessories. To a student: "Take the front. Give it to Choi." "Pick up the collar. Tell Maria to pick up the placket." And so on. Many verbs commonly used at Jantzen can be learned in this way. And vocabularly taught in this context seems to be retained better than if it is taught in patterns such as "This is a collar." After vocabulary had been learned I gave a series of instructions to different students until construction of the completed garment had been simulated. The women enjoyed this and it later became apparent that they had retained almost everything.

Another way I used this activity effectively was to bring in a bag full of accessories and pieces and give such commands as, "Measure the sleeve (with the tape measure). How wide is it?" The student answers. Then, "What did she say?" Another student answers with reported speech. Then, "Cut 2 notches. Make 1 small and 1 big." Or say, "Thread the needle. Pick up the top collar and make 2 stitches. One should be short, the other should be long." When a student has cut 2 notches she will remember the word "notch" better than if she has repeated, "This is a notch." This technique can include numbers, adjectives of color, size, fabric design, collar style, etc., etc., etc. The ways in which this activity can be expanded and varied are endless, allow for maximum participation and creativity from the students and, therefore, active learning.

2) Locational prepositions, vocabulary, descriptions

Each student has a piece of paper. Give instructions such as, "Draw a line from top to bottom down the middle, and from left to right across the middle. Draw a 2-piece swim suit in the top right square. Write your supervisor's name under it. Draw a short-sleeve blouse with a collar and 4 buttons down the front in the bottom right square. Make the blouse striped. And so on. Then, "Where is the _____? Tell me about the bottom left square." Students ask each other, and so

on. There are no limits.

3) Orientation to Jantzen

Most of the women had never been on a tour of the factory and therefore had little idea of what went on in the other sections. We took them on a detailed tour, worked on a floor plan, spent part of one class pretending to be having lunch together in the lunchroom, and spent one session with the Personnel Manager, who carefully explained confusing aspects of the wage system, promotion, holidays and Jantzen's operations.

4) Reading and Writing

Forms which the women needed to be able to read and fill out were brought into class and dealt with. Due to time limitations the only other written work students did was handouts reinforcing oral work done in class.

5) Surviving in problem situations

After necessary structures were either presented by me or extracted from the students, they were given tasks in pairs and asked to settle the problem. These tasks usually involved communication between sewer, cutter or finisher and supervisor. They included such items as "Your paycheque is wrong. Talk to your supervisor about it." "You have a a doctor's appointment at 3:00. You want to take off work early." Or "Your supervisor asks you to work overtime. You're having guests for dinner." "The fee for your job is too low. You want it changed." In addition to learning how to cope in these situations students also became familiar with company procedures for such things as correcting an error in a paycheque.

6) Extracting lesson material from the students

I frequently asked individual students to tell me one thing they said to their supervisor the previous day and one thing their supervisor said

to them. In this way I could keep in touch with the kinds of communication that went on. Another valuable source of information was in drawings from the students of mistakes they had seen or made in sewing. When asked to draw a picture of something wrong, they would come up with pictures of collar points not matching, uneven hems, broken thread, one pocket too low or a flaw in the fabric. I could then see common errors and students could learn how to tell their supervisor. It is obvious here that the sewer could simply show the supervisor. It is also obvious that it is better for everyone if the sewer can tell her.

These activities, of course, must be geared to the students' level but the techniques can be adapted to any range. The experimental nature of this program forced me to try as many different procedures as I could devise. Those described above were among the most effective. My failures I'll keep to myself.

One more point about the giving of commands: it is also important that students realize they are learning something. When they are able to give and follow instructions it really registers that they have learned something.

CONCLUSION

The main problem a teacher faces when presented with a new type of teaching situation is the unknown. One has a tendency to focus on the similarities between the new and the old without giving careful thought to the different aspects related to the students' needs and the immediate environment. In a vocational or other type of special purpose course the teacher must never stop thinking about the situations in which the students need to function. If the teacher is not part of the students' environment, as was the case at Jantzen, then he or she must make a continual effort to keep in touch, to discover, evaluate and internalize not only the evident but also the more subtle needs of the learners and those with whom they must communicate.

Fortunately, the women at Jantzen were a spirited group, and as they overcame their initial timidity they never hesitated to tell me when I was teaching them something wrong, as in, "My supervisor never says that!" or "But we don't have to ask for that. The utility girl just brings it." So much for my big deal lesson plan. The point is, the teacher must be very discriminating in a defined situation such as this and never assume a need. Some old habits have to be broken. It is difficult to decide how to combine the four aspects of language: learning, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and one must necessarily pass lightly over some items which would be appropriate in another classroom. This results in a constant battle with the guilts and there is always frustration over not being able to do everything. And then you always get someone who comes out with, "But they don't NEED English!"